THE CEDARS OF LEBANON.

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A SERMON

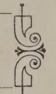
ON THE

CEDARS OF LEBANON,

BY

REV. JAMES S. DENNIS, D. D.,

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 American Church, Beyrout, Syria, 

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TEXT :—" The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree : he shall grow like the cedar in Lebanon. Ps : 92 : 12."

Horace Holden, Stationer, 48 Pine Street, N. Y.

A RIGHTEOUS LIFE LIKE THE CEDARS OF LEBANON.

"The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree: he shall grow like the cedar in Lebanon.—Ps. 92:12."

We have recently visited the famous grove of Cedars, situated on the heights of Mount Lebanon, above the city of Tripoli, on the Syrian coast. They are located in the hollow of a grand amphitheater, surrounded on three sides by the loftiest mountains of the coast range of Lebanon, while on the fourth (toward the west) a deep, wild gorge opens to the Mediterranean. The Cedars themselves are about 6,000 feet above sea level, and form a compact grove, consisting of about 400 noble specimens of this celebrated species. Some of them are immense in size, and excite a feeling of veneration on account of their unknown antiquity. The honorable mention of the cedar in the Scriptures gives a special charm to this solitary grove, which seems to stand as a relic of Jewish times, and a memorial of the palmy days of Lebanon's glory, when thousands of workmen were sent to hew down the cedars for transportation by sea to Jaffa, to be used in the construction of the Temple at Jerusalem. Cedar trees are to be found in other localities on the Lebanon range, but this one grove excels all others in beauty and age. Its singular preservation in such a strikingly picturesque locality is to be traced, no doubt, to religious veneration, and to the influence of superstitions of both heathen and Christian. The venerable guardian of the place informed us, with the utmost solemnity, that if any sacrilegious hands should attempt to cut the trees, and carry away the wood for building fires to cook with, the water in the pot would turn to blood, and be unfit for use. He consoled us, however, by the assurance that the use of such stray bits of wood as were to be found scattered about, if they were burned within the precincts of the grove, would not be attended by any evil consequence.

We infer from several hints in the Bible that the cedar was regarded by the Jews as standing at the very head of the vegetable kingdom. Solomon, it is said, " spake of trees, from the cedar tree that is in Lebanon, even unto the hysop that springeth out of the wall." In Totham's parable, in the 9th of Judges, the bramble is represented as saying : " Let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon," as if assigning to the cedars the highest rank among the trees. In Zachariah, 11:2, is another intimation : " Howl fir tree, for the cedar is fallen ; because the mighty are spoiled." It was also a familiar symbol of royalty and kingly power, as in Ezekiel's parable, in chap. 17th, the "highest branch of the cedar," represents a king of the Jewish royal house ; so, also, it is said, in reference to his power and glory : "Behold, the Assyrian was a cedar in Lebanon." In harmony with this was the selection of the cedar for use in the construction of the Temple and the royal palace, and its designation as the " Cedar of God "— a familiar idiom of both the Hebrew and Arabic indicating dignity, grandeur, and excellence. The same idea is also prominently illustrated in the references to the cedar as a type of the highest prosperity, and the noblest developments : " The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree : he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon."

We spent the Sabbath encamped just on the edge of the grove, within the shadows of two giant trees, where we could look out of our tent in one direction at the lofty mountains quite near us, and towering still 3,000 feet above us, and in the other direction at the stately trees, with the sunlight gleaming among the shadows, and cool and shady vistas opening up in every direction, inviting to a quiet ramble, and filling the spirit with a sense of repose and peaceful retirement. That bright and pleasant Sabbath of rest and reflection, and communion with nature and nature's God, in that favored spot where the noblest forms of natural scenery seemed to borrow a voice and an influence from the inspired Word of the Creator, and convey to the soul lessons of moral wisdom and divine love, as if fresh from heaven, will not be forgotten; indeed the scene will ever hang upon memory's walls as one of its brightest pictures.

"The righteous shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon" was the simple and impressive sermon that was preached to me that day. The majestic mountains formed a fitting pulpit for such a theme, and nature in one of her noblest moods seemed to repeat the inspiring lesson, and never was a sermon more amply and pointedly illustrated and enforced than was this, by the perpetual presence of those noble trees, which were visible emblems of the beauty, the strength, the stability, and the choice fragrance of the righteous man in this world of sin.

Let us stroll quietly down one of these lofty aisles, and find some retired nook in this vast temple of cedars—more glorious even than Solomon's temple of old—and when we are quite by ourselves you will not mind, kind reader, if I give you a brief sketch of the sermon I heard in the solitude of my own heart upon that peaceful Sabbath which I spent amidst the "trees of the Lord" upon the heights of "that goodly mountain."

I. "He shall grow like the cedar in Lebanon." Notice the lofty and majestic appearance of these cedars. They are so stately, so noble, so serenely calm and grand. In all the land we will find no trees to compare with them. They are superior to other trees; they are as kings among them. Even the olive, with all its beauty, is small and inferior in comparison with these lordly cedars. The character of the righteous man shall resemble the cedar in its loftiness, its serenity, its true grandeur, and its elevated worth. Those qualities in human character which, expanded and developed, made us godlike, will be his in a marked degree, and will give him a pre-eminence in goodness. He shall grow above meanness and selfishness. His life, even that which is ordinary and commonplace in it, shall move on the higher level of true manliness. He shall win that place among men which the cedar occupies among the trees, and we shall look up to him with admiration and respect for his true nobility and character, and with a willing recognition of his superior worth and his lofty spiritual position.

II. "He shall grow like the cedar in Lebanon." Notice the peculiar and striking formation of those trees. Their structure is unique; their method of growth is singular. An immense trunk shoots up high in the air, usually symmetrical, and perfectly straight—in the case of the largest and oldest trees it often

divides into two, three, or even four main straight trunks which grow out of the single lower trunk a few feet above the ground,—from these main trunks shoot out branches in various directions, with hardly an exception, all are at right angles with the main trunk, and grow horizontally even to the extreme end. These main horizontal branches send forth smaller branches on either side, which grow upon precisely the same horizontal level as the parent branch, and even the twigs and shoots which still spring from these lesser limbs all grow on each level of the whole branch. The foliage of this branch, even to the tiny leaves of its smallest twigs, all grows upward pointing to the sky, making, as seen from above, a beautiful plateau of green foliage. To witness the full effect of this peculiar growth of the cedar, one must climb to the top of one of the large trees and look down. He sees a series of green beds of springing foliage one above another, the largest nearest the ground, and gradually growing smaller as they approach the top. Out of these verdant beds the cones grow upward as if growing amidst the green grass upon some level lawn. The cedar does not shed its leaves every year, but only once in two years; while the cones take some three years to ripen. Thus the tree is made evergreen, and while it continues fruit-bearing it never loses that rich prolific appearance which is usually seen only for a brief season annually in ordinary fruit-bearing trees. The growth of the branches, at right angles with the main trunk and preserving the same level, gives to the tree at a distance an appearance not unlike its own cone immensely enlarged. The cedar can be recognized almost as far as it can be seen by its individuality. It has a physical presence which distance can hardly disguise, and the traveler, when quite too far off to discern more than the general contour of the tree, recognises it by its peculiar structure and shape. We have then, in addition to its magnificent appearance, a very peculiar individuality of structure and shape distinguishing the cedar. We have habits of growth all its own, giving a beautiful singularity and an unmistakeable mark to its external form. It is a marked tree among trees. Is it not true, also, that a righteous man is a marked man among men? He is distinguished by a spiritual form and a moral structure, which gives him a place among his fellows somewhat like the place

the cedar occupies in contrast with other trees. A righteous man shall grow like a moral cedar. As God has given a peculiar shape to the tree, and under nature's careful culture every branch is trained to grow aright, and every twig to follow in its place and fill out the ideal in all its details, and even the tiny leaves of foliage all lift themselves toward heaven in obedience to a subtle law of physical growth, so the Creator has his ideal of a righteous character, and the quickening power of the Spirit, with the subtle influences of divine grace, are all at work to develop, and train, and mould the spiritual tree into a shapely, and wonderful, and perfect growth—unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ. As by a law of nature the leaves of the tree grow upward, turning ever toward the pure sky, so by a law of grace the righteous man turns heavenward for light, and strength, and help even in the minutiæ of life. This is the conscious and constant habit of his life. Life's glance is upward. Grace has brought him the precious secret. Thus he grows into the shape God would have him take. Thus his character develops in conformity to Christ.

As the cedar is known from afar by its peculiar appearance, so the righteous man is known among men by certain peculiarities of disposition and certain habits of life, which are as marks of his discipleship. We do not mean that a righteous man invariably possesses every excellency of spirit, every social grace, and every commendable habit, for this would be a very untenable exaggeration ; but what is recognizable in a righteous man is an aspiring temper, an earnest purpose, a positive movement toward what is gracious, and lovely, and of good report. He is not perfect, but he aims at perfection. He is not a model of every excellence, but there is no excellence of character and life that he does not long, and strive to attain, and exemplify. A righteous man is not of necessity a crowned spiritual victor with his battle fought and his laurels won, but he is one who is manfully fighting the good fight, and who has no thought of laying down the weapons of his warfare until the final struggle has been passed, and the peace of eternity has been gained. His life is a process of growth. He shall *grow* like a cedar. The shapely and magnificent pro-

portions of the full grown tree are rather the acme of his growth, the goal of his hopes, the summit of his aims.

With this qualification, we need not hesitate to press the point taken—that a righteous man is a marked man among men. He grows under a divine nurture, he developes in conformity to a supremely perfect model. He shall be known from afar by the shapely contour of a character which, however undeveloped as yet, gives promise of final perfection, of fully rounded graces, of wide spreading charities, of lofty excellencies, of deeply rooted allegiance to sound doctrine and pure morality.

III.—"He shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon." Consider the stability of these trees and their brave endurance of the wintry blasts and the heavy snows of this bleak locality. They are situated 6,000 feet above sea level at the head of a long, deep gorge facing the storm quarter, and up through which the wind rushes with terrific violence. Heavy snows fall in the winter, so that for several months of the year the grove is inaccessible to the ordinary traveler. Even after the intense heat of the long Syrian summer, the snow still lies in immense banks upon the mountains above us, and is plainly visible from our tents. Even now (September), although early in the season, the west and south-west winds bring a cool, sharp hint of winter as they come up the gorge in gusts and sigh through the branches. Who can describe the fierce January tempests that come leaping over the broad expanse of the Mediterranean, and come howling and tearing up the gorge of the Kadisha, which grows narrower as it ascends, until they spring with the fury of wild beasts into the wide amphitheatre in the centre of which stands the brave, solitary group of martyr-like cedars. For centuries this cruel play of the elements has been repeated times without number, and yet this devoted band has stood the onslaught and successfully fought the storms, and preserved even its tiny and tender shoots from the yawning jaws of the tempest as it flew down upon them like a lion upon its prey.

We may wander through the grove and inspect carefully the huge trunks, and we will not find a decayed one among them. There is not a false hearted tree among them all. Usually when trunks attain to such immense size it is found that decay has

commenced at the heart of the tree, and the trunk is found to be hollow—sometimes immense cavities exist, leaving only the shell of the tree sound and good. Yet among all these cedars there is not a hollow trunk, except such as have been made so by goat-herds kindling their fires at the sheltered base of the tree, and so gradually burning out a hollow place in the trunk. They are sound to the core. If we examine the names of travelers and visitors carved upon the trunks, we will find some which have been cut over a hundred years, and yet they are as distinct as if carved in the wood yesterday. There is one name of some French visitor which has passed its centennial by several years, and yet it is cut upon a broad, smooth surface of the trunk from which the bark had been removed, facing the quarter from which the winter storms invariably beat in all their intensity. Wind and rain, snow and hail has pelted and gnawed that exposed surface for more than a century, and yet the name is still distinct and perfectly legible. It would seem as if solid marble or granite would hardly stand the test of time and weather more successfully. In the recent excavations of the palace of one of the Assyrian kings, some fragments of cedar beams were found by Mr. Layard, which have since been transported to England, and are now preserved in the British Museum. These have survived the wear and tear of time, and the destroying power of the chemical action of the elements for perhaps thirty centuries, and are still in a state of remarkable preservation.*

This heroic endurance and wonderful stability of the cedar fighting the elements, whether planted in its native soil upon the heights of Lebanon, or resisting the destroying influences of chemical forces amidst the buried ruins of Ninevah, afford a most suggestive symbol of corresponding spiritual virtues in the righteous—brave endurance of the storms of trial, and unflinching stability amidst the deteriorating influences of worldliness. It cannot be said that the cedar escapes the storms or that they beat more lightly upon it; nor can it be supposed that it is preserved in any mysterious and inscrutable way from the ordinary chemical agencies which produce such decay and

*Mr. Carruthers, keeper of the Botanical Department, British Museum, has made a careful microscopic examination of the wood cells of these beams, and confirms Mr. Layard's opinion that they were cedars from Lebanon.

destruction in all vegetable matter. The stability and endurance of the cedar cannot be traced to any special exemption from the destroying power of the elements, but only to its own capacity of resistance and the soundness of its structure. Its own excellence is the measure and guarantee of its security. Its mission is to endure bravely, successfully, grandly, and in this it faces the tempest and achieves a victory over every adversity. It is certainly true of the righteous that like the cedar he does not escape the storm ; nor is he preserved from contact with evil and its dread power to corrupt and destroy. He achieves a cheerful and complete triumph over earthly trials, even though they beat wildly and crushingly upon him. He bravely and persistently resists the deteriorating influence of evil, although he lives exposed to its mighty power and prone to yield to its subtle and deadly thrall.

This victorious endurance and this heroic resistance of the righteous amidst the trials and temptations of life are the result of heavenly aid and consolation. While many fall upon every hand, divine power keeps the righteous. While many quail with terror or sink in despair amidst the darkness and suffering of their earthly lot, the sweet confidence of faith and the calm patience of trust prove for him a sufficient refuge and a friendly covert. The " shadow of the great rock" is ever ready in " the weary land."

IV.—" He shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon." There is still another peculiarity of the cedar which deserves to be noted. It is the peculiar and rich aromatic fragrance of the wood. It is this sweet and pungent odor of the cedar which is referred to, no doubt, in those passages of Scripture which speak of " the smell of Lebanon." It is said in Solomon's Song : "And the smell of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon." In Hosea it is said of the redeemed and purified Israel : " His branches shall spread and his beauty shall be as the olive tree, and his smell as Lebanon." Ancient historians and poets speak of the cedar, among other woods, as being burnt at funerals to give a sweet perfume.

It can hardly be regarded as a forced simile to speak of the perfume of a righteous life. It is like the fragrance of a choice flower in the garden of society. We gather sweet scented

flowers and place them with the most careful provision for their preservation, in the most conspicuous and frequented places in our homes, and we rejoice in their delicate odors, and would have our houses permeated and filled with them. Thus the delicate and refining influences of sweet and sincere piety are prized, and cherished and regarded by all as a gentle and refreshing fragrance which they would fain have linger about them and add its charm to this common-place, every-day world, so full of selfishness, insincerity and pride. There is an aromatic richness and pungency to the odor of the cedar which not inaptly illustrates the exquisitely refreshing and stimulating influence of cheerful and genuine piety.

In this connection may be noted an interesting fact which has its striking counterpart in the spiritual experience of the righteous. Here and there throughout the grove we noticed trees from which the branches had been broken—as if torn by the violence of the wind or snapped off by the weight of the snow—leaving jagged and rough stumps extending out a few inches or a few feet from the trunk. Upon the torn and splintered extremities of these remnants of branches we noticed the fragrant, resinous gum of the tree had exuded in unusual quantities, so that these unsightly places were especially fragrant with the peculiar ordor of the wood. So in the spiritual experience of the Christian : it is his sorrows and trials which bring out the sweetest perfume of his piety. The fragrant graces of resignation, patience, humility, submissive trust and courageous hope gather on the torn and shattered surface of some broken branch which has been wrenched off by the blasts of affliction or broken down by the wintry snows of adversity.

V.—" He shall grow like the cedar in Lebanon." It remains to note one more fact in relation to the cedar which has its counterpart in the sphere and growth of a righteous life. It will be remembered that it was chosen by David and Solomon —no doubt by divine direction—as the wood chiefly to be used in the construction of the temple, a fact frequently referred to in Chap. V and VI of 1st Kings. Hiram and Solomon united in sending thousands of workmen to " hew the cedar trees out of Lebanon " for use in building the temple, 1st Kings, 5 : 6, 15, 18. The splendors of that wonderul structure must have

been greatly enhanced by the beauty of the cedar wood—capable of an exquisite polish—used so abundantly in its construction. The special and perpetual honor accruing to the cedar itself from this prominent and useful place assigned to it in the Temple of the Lord must not be overlooked. It must have been intimately identified in the minds of the ancient Jewish church with the dignity and glory of that sacred edifice. This service for which the cedar was chosen was, therefore, of a nature as honorable and distinguished as could well be designated to a representative of the vegetable kingdom.

The point of special interest in this connection is the fact that the cedar was chosen and appointed to a sphere of useful and honored service in the Kingdom of God. Corresponding to this in a marked degree is the honored and useful sphere of service in the Church and Kingdom of Christ assigned by Divine Providence to the righteous. It is true that the sphere of service is a wide and varied one. Righteous lives are found in every rank and station of society; they move in widely different spheres of worldly occupation and influence; while perhaps the majority of them are unknown to fame and social prominence. The sphere of influence and usefulness in which a righteous life moves is not limited, however, by these external accidents of its worldly position. The manifold resources of Providence are used to expand the power of a pious and Godly life, and no human scrutiny can trace the subtle and secret influences which go forth, all unknown, even to their author, to benefit the world and elevate society.

It is, moreover, apparent to all who are at all familiar with the history of Christianity and the work of the Christian Church in the world, that the righteous are in numberless instances specially called and providently assigned to a noble and blessed service. In the many departments of benevolent effort for alleviating the misery and suffering in the world; in the noble crusades against the great evils of society; in the ranks of Christian authorship; in all departments of academic and theological instruction; in the Sabbath School; in the work of Home and Foreign Missions; in the pulpit, and in other ways open to the earnest Chistian worker, the righteous

fulfill a glorious mission, and are acknowledged as the chosen and honored servants of the most High.

Thus in many marked respects "the righteous shall grow like the cedar." He shall attain to a loftiness of moral character, a uniqueness of moral structure, a stable endurance in trial, a successful resistence of evil, a rich spiritual fragrance and a noble and useful service. He who planted the cedar in Lebanon and gave it its beauty, its stability and its grandeur, watches over a righteous life to cultivate and beautify it; to guard and guide it; to train it and bring it to perfection; to acknowledge it as a tree of His own planting, and even to rejoice in its noble development, its shapely proportions, and its unfading verdure, and to choose it for some noble use in His blessed service.

We may note in conclusion that this growth of a righteous life is not confined to the limited space of its earthly career. Earth is indeed but the threshold of heaven. Beyond the fleeting and fading scenes of time the soul begins a new career of growth, under happier auspices, amidst the limitless possibilities of eternity. A few sharp and skillful strokes of the Sidonian hewer (1st Kings, 5: 6), would fell the loftiest cedar of Lebanon, and the giant trunk would lie prostrate upon the mountain side. But is this the end? Picture to yourself the glittering beams of cedar, polished and carved with beautiful designs, in the temple at Jerusalem, and you have the answer. So the spiritual cedars that fall by the swift stroke of death and seem to lie prostrate upon the mountain sides of time—shall we say of them that this is the end? No! we cannot. Amidst the splendors of the upper Temple we shall yet find them, living beams, polished and resplendent—cedars of eternal righteousness, forever safe from all decay, forever beautiful with the purity of heaven.